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ABSTRACT

A study described student evaluations of an assignment in a course in family communication that required writing and performing (in small groups) a personal family narrative. Of the 43 students sent questionnaires asking for their reactions to the assignment, 40 returned completed questionnaires. Content analysis of the responses to the assignment revealed that prior to writing their narratives, students had high expectations of learning, general positive and negative thoughts about the assignment, and several technical concerns. After writing the narrative and before sharing it, students considered their written work as a learning experience, although they expressed anxiety about sharing it aloud, and mentioned continued concern with technical difficulties. After sharing and listening to the narratives, students reported gaining insights into their own and others' families, witnessing the development of group cohesion, and having general positive reactions. Even with all the benefits of the assignment, teachers should be aware of potential negative outcomes and ethical problems associated with an assignment that some students may see as intrusive. (Contains 28 references.) (RS)

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"I Felt Filled by the Experience, as If Writing the Narrative Gave Me a Piece of My Own Life": Appraisals of a Personal Narrative Assignment in a Family Communication Course

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Abstract

This essay describes student evaluations of an assignment in a course in family communication that requires writing and performing (in small groups) a personal family narrative. Such an assignment is well suited to a course in family communication because families provide their members with the stories with which they most identify, the stories that, to a large extent, define who the members are. Writing and sharing a personal family narrative provides an opportunity to gain the benefits of self-disclosure, such as make meaning of one's own history, and learn about one's family influences in an important and powerful way. Also, listening to others' stories provides each student with the opportunity to compare and contrast his or her family to others'.

Content analysis of responses to the assignment revealed that prior to writing their narratives, students had high expectations of learning, general positive and negative thoughts about the assignment, and several technical concerns. After writing the narrative and before sharing it, students considered their written work as a learning experience, although they expressed anxiety about sharing it aloud, and mentioned continued concern with technical difficulties. After sharing and listening to the narratives, students reported gaining insights into their own and others' families, witnessing the development of group cohesion, and having general positive reactions. The essay concludes with a discussion of problems associated with an assignment requiring or encouraging self-disclosure, and potential ethical problems raised by a family narrative assignment.

"I Felt Filled by the Experience, as If Writing the Narrative Gave Me a Piece of My Own Life": Appraisals of a Personal Narrative Assignment in a Family Communication Course

An untold story is an unexamined experience; without the telling, its significance is diminished or lost.

(Downs, 1993, p. 303)

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to describe student evaluations of an assignment in a course in family communication that requires writing and performing (in small groups) a personal family narrative. Personal narratives are the stories people tell to peers about their lived experiences—the mundane as well as the fantastic, life-changing ones. Narrative, according to Dwight Conquergood (1993):

> is a way of knowing, a search for meaning, that privileges experience, process, action, and peril. Knowledge is not stored in storytelling so much as it is enacted, reconfigured, tested, and engaged by imaginative summonings and interpretive replays of past events in the light of present situations and struggles. Active and emergent, instead of abstract and inert, narrative knowing recalls and recasts experience into meaningful signposts for ongoing action. (p. 337)

Personal narratives are powerful because they reveal pieces of who the storyteller is and allow others to be privy to her or his individual culture. Two recent explications of personal narratives (Langellier, 1989; Stern & Henderson, 1993) detail the uses they serve. For example, personal narratives help the storyteller construct his or her reality, gain a sense of value and empowerment, and simultaneously give the listeners/readers information that is potentially useful for their own lives (Stern and Henderson 1993, 35).

Family narratives serve additional functions that highlight their particular importance for understanding families as a whole as well as individual family members.

For example, family stories persuade family members that they are special, clarify family rules, teach about the world and how the family copes with its successes and troubles, and help family members gain a sense of identity (Langellier & Peterson, 1994; Lloyd & Mullen, 1990; Stone, 1988). In a detailed analysis of family storytelling as a form of social control, Langellier and Peterson (1994) describe how (a) the content of family stories—what information is included and what information is excluded, as well as when certain information is told to family members; (b) who controls what is told to whom and when ("storytelling rights and audience responsibilities," p. 67); and (c) the way family stories regulate the tensions between family versus individual family member interests, combine to help family members organize as a family. Ultimately, family stories create and transmit family culture among members and between generations (Ruffin, 1993), and, therefore, make the family more cohesive (Zeitlin, Kotkin, & Baker, 1982).

An assignment to write and perform a personal narrative is well suited to a course in family communication. According to Mary Strine (1993), "Those stories with which we most readily identify give shape, direction, and significance to otherwise chaotic existence and, ultimately, inform our sense of who we are" (p. 367). Given the pivotal influence of families on their members' beliefs, values, and behavior (Galvin & Brommel, 1991; Pearson, 1993), the study of family communication is the study of who the members are; indeed, families provide their members with the stories they most identify with, the stories that, to a large extent, define who they are (Langellier & Peterson, 1994; Ruffin, 1993). If people <u>are</u> their family stories, then writing and sharing a personal family narrative provides the opportunity to rediscover one's self, to make meaning of one's own history, and to "recall and recast" one's own experience of family members and family events, and recognize the grounding they provide. Writing helps clarify the story for oneself because putting the family narrative into words requires recognizing what is known and, equally as important, what is not known.

Sharing personal family narratives via performance is important in a family communication course because of the information the performance provides both the storytellers and those who hear their stories (Horwood, 1991). Unlike classroom lectures, discussions, and directed activities, "stories capture, more than scores of mathematical formulae ever can, the richness and indeterminacy of our experiences . . . the complexity of our understandings . . ." (Carter, 1993, p. 5). The act of performing—of hearing oneself read her or his narrative out loud to others—actualizes and realizes the narrative for the storyteller (Bacon, 1979, p. 6), makes it more real than the private, written words, and reveals the written words and makes them at once clearer and more complex for her or him (Long & HopKins, 1982, p. xiii). Like other acts of self-disclosure—the revelation of personal information not easily obtained from sources other than the person disclosing (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Towne, 1992; Cozby, 1973)—performing one's personal family narrative can provide self-clarification, self-validation, and catharsis (Rosenfeld & Kendrick, 1984), and can relieve stress, reduce feelings of shame, and provide the impetus for obtaining social support (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993). Finally, performing one's story may provide the basis for changes in behavior (Diamond, 1990).

In addition to the potential benefits for the storytellers, stories serve an equally important function for listeners. Listening to others' personal family narratives provides an opportunity to learn:

> We feel the familiarity of those involved, their circumstances, their thinking and feeling, and the satisfaction or dissatisfaction of their realizations. We learn through them and from them. . . . The stories are valuable, in other words, because they reveal/manifest truths about us. (Fisher, 1993, p. 279)

Listening to others' stories provides each student with the opportunity to compare and contrast his or her family to others'—to find the commonalties that make all families familiar, and the peculiarities that make her or his own family singular. In the end, students discover that families come in a variety of configurations (e.g., blended, single

parent, dual worker, and nuclear), with similar and unique problems, similar and unique stressors, similar and unique rules, and so on (Galvin & Brommel, 1991; Pearson, 1993).

Family Narrative Assignment

Teaching a class on autobiography, Dana Gulling Mead (1990) asked her students to generate a list of recommendations for assigning an autobiographical exploratory essay. Among their recommendations were the following: keep the class small, make the exploratory essay the first one of the semester, and provide a model. Based on these guidelines, the following assignment, the first due during the semester, was presented in a course in family communication (cf. Wolff, 1993):

> Based on your reading of the 20 short stories in Family Portraits: Remembrances by Twenty Distinguished Writers (Anthony 1989),[1] write your own short story about a significant family member or a significant family event. The story should not exceed 1500 words (approximately 5-6 pages); there is no minimum length. Make two copies of the story, one to hand in and one to read aloud in class to a small group of classmates (approximately five people, including yourself).
>
> Evaluation of the story is based on the extent to which it clearly describes the family member or family event and why the person or event is significant. Also, evaluation is based on how well the story presents an insight or understanding of an aspect of families in general, or at least one family in particular—much like the stories in Family Portraits.

Questionnaire and Analysis

One week after reading their stories aloud in small groups, 40 students were presented with the following questionnaire.[2] At the same time, three students who completed the assignment during the previous semester also were presented with the questionnaire. The aim was to see if the time lapse of eight months changed perceptions of/reactions to the personal family narrative assignment.

The questionnaire consisted of four parts, presented after the following introduction: "This is an anonymous response/reaction to the assignment we just completed on writing and sharing our family narratives. You do not have to indicate your name on this paper, although you may do so if you wish. Please be honest and candid in your answers."

1. Prior to writing the narrative, how did you feel about the assignment (e.g., were you anxious, excited, scared)? Can you explain (briefly) why you felt as you did? What did you think about the assignment (e.g., did you think it was going to be useful, useless, interesting, boring)? Can you explain (briefly) why you thought as you did?

2. After writing the narrative (and before sharing it), how did you feel about the assignment? Can you explain (briefly) why you felt as you did? What did you think about the assignment? Can you explain (briefly) why you thought as you did?

3. Now that you have shared your story and listened to others' stories, how do you feel about the assignment? Can you explain (briefly) why you feel as you do? What do you think about the assignment? Can you explain (briefly) why you think as you do?

4. What is your reaction to hearing the other narratives? Can you explain (briefly) why you are reacting as you are?

Content analysis was used to explicate responses to the four questions. According to Holsti (1969), content analysis is "a phase of information processing in which communication content is transformed, through objective and systematic application of categorization rules, into data that can be summarized and compared" (p. 3). The goal of content analysis is to find natural "structures" by which the data can be organized and interpreted. Specifically, the goal of this investigation was to find common themes in responses to each of the four questions. The frequency of occurrence of each theme also was noted.

Results

Forty questionnaires were returned (93 percent), including 37 from the 40 students currently enrolled, and three from the students who completed the course during the prior semester. Responses from the three individuals who completed the course in family communication during the prior semester were not different from those currently enrolled, so responses from the two groups were collapsed.

Responses to questions 1 (reactions prior to writing the narrative) and 2 (reactions to writing the narrative, and prior to performing it) were reduced to three themes each. Questions 3 (reactions after the presentation of the narratives) and 4 (reactions to hearing the narratives), which received overlapping responses, were combined.

Prior to Writing the Narrative

Three themes emerged from a content analysis of responses to the first question: (a) Expectations of Learning, (b) General Thoughts about the Assignment, and (c) Technical Issues.

Expectations of Learning

In response to the first question, 38% of the students wrote that it was their expectation to learn something about their own family from writing the family narrative; one person indicated her or his expectation was to learn about others' families. Most pointed out that having to think about a family member or family event was, itself, useful, but that having to write about the selected family member or family event provided an opportunity and challenge to explore more deeply and clarify more fully the thoughts and feelings involved. The following are sample responses expressing this theme:[3]

- I feel I always learn something (often about myself) when I put words on paper and try to make sense of them.

- I felt that the assignment would be interesting and self-reflecting. I felt that it would be quite useful because you should always take time to think about your family.

- I thought the assignment would be a good way to verbalize a lot of things I usually don't say.

- I thought the assignment would help me get off my chest some things about my dad.

- I was excited about this assignment because it gave me the opportunity to explore my childhood, my upbringing, and my relationship with my parents and my siblings.

- I thought the assignment would be useful to reflect on our [mine and my mom's] past together, since my mom isn't around me as much.

- I thought it would be useful to help me get in touch with my feelings on things which I refuse to talk about.

- I thought it would make me think of my family in an objective way—something I haven't done in too long.

- I was looking forward to the assignment because I was going to write about a very personal family event that I do not often let myself think about so deeply.

- I was somewhat anxious at first only because I did not know what feelings I would uncover during the process. I thought the paper would be useful.

- I thought the assignment would be both interesting and useful because I would learn about other people's families [when I heard their stories]. Everybody's family is different.

General Thoughts about the Assignment

The act of writing and then reading aloud one's narrative occupied the attention of many of the students. Reactions took two distinct tracks, one positive (23% of the responses) and one negative (25%). The following are sample responses expressing general positive thoughts about the family narrative assignment:

- I enjoy writing and my grandfather is a fond subject for me to write about.

- I was excited because I enjoy sharing the story of my mother.

- I was excited, for I love my family and love to tell others about them.

- I (finally) had the opportunity to pay tribute to someone in my life who I love and respect very much.

- I was excited—I didn't think it would be difficult, and I wanted to tell about my family in the same expressive, touching way [as in Family Portraits].

- I love to write and I love to tell stories about my family.

- I felt excited. I have meant to do this since my grandfather died so my children may have something to fill out their limited memories of [him].

The following are sample responses expressing general negative thoughts about the family narrative assignment:

- I felt anxious and nervous because I knew exactly what I was going to write about and it is a hard topic for me to talk about with close friends, much less write about it and read it out loud to my classmates. I was scared to put my story on paper and bring back the painful memories.
- I was anxious about having to read my own story. I didn't want my family to sound strange/different from others even though I knew it was.
- I felt cautious. My family is so dysfunctional I was afraid of saying much of anything about them.
- I was a little scared/anxious. I was revealing something important to strangers.
- For the most part, I didn't think it was a good idea to share my story with other people. I was upset. I felt that the requirement to share stories was ridiculous.

Technical Issues

The third theme to emerge from the content analysis, expressed by 23% of the students, concerned anxiety about technical issues, such as selecting a topic about which to write. The following are sample responses expressing this theme:

- At first I was anxious that I wouldn't be happy with the subject I picked and that I couldn't make mine as moving as the stories in Family Portraits.
- I was anxious about writing this because I had no idea who to write about.
- I was very nervous because I really couldn't think of anything to write about.
- Was my story going to be able to relate how much I loved this person?

After Writing the Narrative and Before Sharing It

Three themes emerged from a content analysis of responses to the second question: (a) Learning Experience, (b) Anxiety about Sharing, and (c) Technical Difficulties.

Learning Experience

Forty-three percent of the students saw the writing of their family narrative as a learning experience. While all of the students who expected the assignment to be a learning experience had their expectations fulfilled, several who did not mention expecting to learn anything did mention, in response to the second question, that writing

the narrative helped them discover something about their family. The following are sample responses expressing this theme:

- I felt good about [writing the narrative] mainly because it allowed me to get my feelings out in an organized manner and reflect on what my family went through. I thought the paper was very therapeutic and helpful for me.

- I enjoyed writing the assignment and it was useful because it made me examine feelings for my grandfather that had been previously nebulous.

- It was difficult to confront the issues the story forced me to confront. I wanted to write a funny, uplifting story, and what came out was painful.

- [The narrative] was useful because it helped me clear up some things.

- I felt like I understood more fully what my family meant to me.

- It made me think more in depth on my relationship with my mom. It helped me put my whole relationship with my mother together.

- I felt filled by the experience, as if writing the narrative gave me a piece of my own life.

- It's not every day that we have time to sit down and think about all the tiny things that make up our family history, and I learned a lot from it.

- I brought back some sad memories. I think it was good for us to think seriously about a member of our family and an event. I don't think we do that often enough.

- I felt better just getting my feelings down on paper. It was a huge plus. I came into contact with many things I hadn't thought of in years. I felt closer to the person.

- I think the assignment helped me confront new feelings and recall some truly wonderful as well as painful memories.

- This assignment turned out to be such a cathartic experience for me because I had "put away" my thoughts about this person for ten years. For me, because I took it to heart, the assignment was a growing experience. I felt good. I felt pain.

- After writing, I felt a case of wholeness at having been able to articulate on paper a murky and conflicting bunch of emotions that surrounded the experience I described—like the articulating of it helped me to make more sense of it.

- I never thought I would be able to put my story in writing. It made me think (I mean really <u>think</u>) about something I didn't want to think about. I felt like I accomplished something.

Anxiety about Sharing

Although this theme was partially evident in responses to the first question, it became paramount for 33% of the students when responding to the second question. Clearing, there was anxiety associated with the act of sharing the narrative by reading it aloud to a small group of classmates. The following are sample responses expressing this theme:

- I was still having anxious feelings about sharing such a personal event with my classmates because I didn't know how I would handle telling my story or how my peers would react.
- I was anxious about sharing it, whether or not the other students would think it was corny. I felt a little hesitant, at first, sharing something so personal.
- I didn't want to [share my story aloud] because I felt like my story was personal and others would not appreciate or understand it.
- I felt my paper is probably boring—who wants to hear about a single parent mom and her child?
- I got over the fear of writing the story down, but I still didn't want to share it with people in the class!

Technical Difficulties

Similar to the theme found in the content analysis of responses to the first question, concerns about technical matters, such as, writing a "good" story, persisted for 20% of the students. The following are sample responses expressing this theme:

- I didn't know if the words on the paper were adequate enough to let them know how much this person means to me.
- It is hard for me to put things/feelings down on paper because I don't share them very well.
- I felt like I didn't write enough or I didn't give enough detail. I didn't feel like I'd been fair to my mother. I was honest, but selectively so.
- It was much more difficult to write than I first thought. The subject matter was so personal that I had trouble choosing words that would express the importance of the message.
- After writing my paper I felt sad that my experience with my grandfather would never be reducible to paper successfully.
- I felt like [my story] wasn't enough.
- After writing the narrative . . . I felt a little weird, like I hadn't really given the right picture, or told the story correctly, so I called my parents and read it to

them. They remembered things differently, of course, but reassured me by their laughter and tears that I told the story I had to tell.

After Sharing the Narratives

Responses to the last two questions were not distinguished, therefore, they were combined. In the end, three themes emerged from a content analysis of responses to the third and fourth questions: (a) Insights into One's Own and Others' Families, (b) Development of Group Cohesion, and (c) General Positive Reactions. A fourth reaction, not widespread enough to be a "theme," was offered by three students whose overall response to the assignment was negative.

Insights into One's Own and Others' Families

In their responses to the third and fourth questions, all but three students (93%) wrote that they learned something from the process of writing the family narratives, reading them aloud, and listening to others' narratives. They learned something about their own families as well as the families of other students, implying they learned something about families "in general." The following are sample responses expressing this theme:

- This assignment really made us realize how much and how deeply our families affect us. I found myself looking at relationships in my own life that are congruent with those being described. Sometimes I was jealous of good things absent in my own life—sometimes touched by something I could relate to—sometimes encouraged by hearing problems that I, too, had to put up with.

- I enjoyed hearing the other stories. It gave me insight into these other people's lives. I could connect with all the stories read and there were a lot of similarities to my family and my feelings.

- [The narratives were all] important, and all different—but the same.

- The assignment helped me to share things I have kept bottled up and helped me to feel more confident in sharing with a group.

- The assignment was really necessary to understand who you are and how you relate to your family.

- I really felt as if the assignment helped me get a better understanding of what types of families there are in our society. I enjoyed hearing the stories. Each one of [the storytellers] had some type of family experience that helped them build character, and expressed the people they are now.

- I was sad because all [the stories] I heard were touching and made me realize how much my grandparents mean to me for all the ones I heard were about them.

- The assignment showed me that mine is not the first "non-normal" family.

- I feel that the narratives served as outlets of withheld emotions and this is great. The narratives were moving and somewhat serious. . . . I related to something in each of the narratives.

- Everyone's family is different, but many of their feelings and experiences are similar. I found aspects to relate to from all the stories I heard.

- I feel good. I see my family in a new way. I feel closer to them. The assignment allowed me to access my family, interpret, draw conclusions. I would like to expand/rework my story at a later date. I wrote it, I shared it, and I lived! I could do this again.

- [The stories] remind us how alike families can be regardless of how different we think our family is. It was a comfort.

- All of us expressed how much we learned just by the act of reflecting and by elucidating events which we had never thought about, but just remembered in passing. I realized that although we came from different families we had much in common.

- I enjoyed listening to the classmates' stories because they gave me insight into their families as well as insight into [each of] them.

Development of Group Cohesion

Thirty percent of the students wrote that sharing the family narratives in groups fostered feelings of "bonding" and served as the stimulus for high group cohesion. The following are sample responses expressing this theme:

- I felt that others shared my pain and I shared other's pain as well.

- I felt connected to the members of my group.

- It was definitely a bonding experience that facilitated a lot of insightful discussion of every story.

- I felt as if I knew the people in the group so much better because I heard stories that are a true reflection of who they are and what they come from.

- I felt one of those great bonding moments with humanity that says, "Hey, you got your family baggage, and everyone else does too."

- For a minute, I wasn't alone. People cried when they listened to my story. To tell your story out loud to others was something I had never experienced before. It created a very, very different kind of special bonding between us (the members of the group).

General Positive Reactions

Ninety-three percent of the students expressed positive overall evaluations of the narrative assignment; several focused specifically on the value of sharing the stories by reading them aloud; and several focused on the seriousness with which the assignment was completed. The following are sample responses expressing this theme:

- I think it is a good idea for us to read them aloud to each other because it helps us to take them seriously (our own stories) and not put them away as "just some paper I wrote for class."

- Sharing the stories was the best part. I wish I could have heard all the stories [in the class]. I really enjoyed listening to the other narratives.

- I felt that the stories were more powerful than they would have been if I just read them. [All the stories] seemed to deal with things I had been through.

- In some ways, it felt good to talk aloud about my family. Since I was open and honest in my story, I felt that the people in my group learned more about me.

- Telling my story made things feel better. Part of the difficulty of my story is that it's one I had inside me but had never before let out—one I had not yet told. Now that I have, it feels better.

- I wish more of my assignments in college were as rewarding as this. It was obvious everyone in my group took the assignment seriously.

- I feel fortunate to have heard such person aspects of students' lives and also fortunate to have been able to tell my own story. [A great deal of] care went into the stories.

- I'm a little concerned—I had the best time writing this paper. I was very impressed and a little intimidated by the other narratives because they seemed so eloquent and attentive to the smallest details.

- It was one of the best things I have ever experienced. It was therapeutic.

- I had expected that the group would be really awkward, but that feeling wasn't even an issue. I felt much more comfortable than I thought. I still, eight months later, remember all the stories I heard that day.

Negative Reactions

There were too few negative reactions to label this a theme; however, three students were, overall, unhappy with aspects of the narrative assignment. One student (the first example) clearly was unsatisfied with the group's response to his or her narrative; the other two students were unsatisfied with their own narratives.

- I feel stupid. My group could care less about my story. My story was important to me and to have it brushed off was humiliating.

- I felt everyone else's [story] was better than mine.

- I felt self-conscious to read my own—it was rather "sappy" or sentimental, and that's hard to share with people you barely know. I have an urge to write several more stories that are more real to me and less picturesque.

Conclusion

Of the many benefits that may be derived from self-disclosure, several emerged as most important in connection with the personal family narrative assignment described here. First and foremost, a large majority of students achieved self-clarification, that is, they learned something important about themselves as family members. Writing the story provided one type of clarification, for example, the necessity to understand points of information about family members and/or events, and the sharing of the narrative via performance provided another type of clarification, for example, the importance and power of the information. Clearly, the personal narrative assignment fulfilled its pedagogical purpose, that is, it provided an excellent opportunity for learning about one's own family as well as others' families.

Second, sharing the narratives provided a catharsis associated with reduced feelings of shame. The recognition that most families share tragedies and problems that are similar in intensity and their life-changing potential, even if different in specific content, provided the opportunity to recognize that the shame felt about one's family (feelings that one's family is, somehow, "different" and, therefore, "wrong" or "bad") was unnecessary or perhaps exaggerated. The result, in many cases, was a cathartic experience, the purgation of negative feelings associated with feelings of shame.

The third most pronounced outcome from the narrative assignment related to social support, which emerged from the content analysis as "bonding." Specifically, students described receiving several types of social support (Richman, Rosenfeld, & Hardy, 1993), including emotional support (comfort, caring) , reality confirmation support (confirmation of the storyteller's perceptions of reality), and task appreciation support (acknowledgment of the value of the story).

Even with all these benefits, several cautionary notes are required. Like any dialectical tension—the need to reveal/share one's self and the need for privacy are continuously in opposition (Derlega at al., 1993)—the potential exists for outcomes of self-disclosure that are not beneficial. For example, the social support received may be negative, as was the case for the one student who felt "stupid," feelings of shame may increase, or insights provided by the self-disclosure may increase stress.

In addition to these possible negative outcomes, ethical problems also accompany the decision to use a personal narrative assignment in a family communication course. In a provocative piece for the Chronicle of Higher Education, Susan Swartzlander, Diana Pace, and Virginia Lee Stamler (1993) detail several of the ethical problems associated with requiring students to write about their personal lives. They discuss, for example, problems associated with the following: (a) grading (e.g., the highest grades appear to go to those papers that are "most moving," and it is neither possible nor appropriate to grade "someone's feelings"); (b) the extent to which students are able to judge how much to reveal (e.g., students, unable to assess the degree to which a paper should be revealing, are subject to feelings of shame if they are too disclosive); (c) the loss of boundaries between the professional and personal dimensions of the classroom (e.g., personal disclosures become the subject matter of the class, perhaps encouraging paternalistic responses on the part of the professor); and (d) gender differences (e.g., women writers are more likely to have traumatic tales to share, such as ones of sexual abuse, and the person with whom they are forced to share them is typically a male professor, and men writers may feel forced to convey emotions they have been socialized to withhold).

The authors provide several suggestions for protecting students from activities the students may perceive as intrusive. First, students should not be made to feel they have to or should "deal with" their problems—they should write only that with which they feel comfortable. Second, it should be made clear that what the students submit will not be shared with others without their permission (this includes not returning papers

via a box left outside the professor's office). Third, assignments that require personal narratives should be described at the outset of the semester, to give students a fair chance to withdraw their registration before being penalized.

A fourth recommendation is implicit in the others: completion of the assignment must be voluntary. If students can choose to disclose, there is less probability of a violation of their right to privacy (Derlega et al., 1993).

Completing an assignment within these guidelines does not guarantee complete "success." While 37 of the 40 students described the experience of writing and performing their personal family narratives in positive terms (at least by the time the assignment was completed), and reflected that they learned a great deal about their own and others' families, not every student was so gladdened. In the end, however, each student had the opportunity—whether to avail oneself of the opportunity was an individual choice—to share her or his personal narrative and to learn about her or his family, and to learn about others' families, in a way unparalleled by more typical classroom assignments.

Notes

[1] The twenty short stories, by authors such as Margaret Atwood, Gail Godwin, Walker Percy, Sara Paretsky, Issac Bashevis Singer, and Wallace Stegner, were written in response to the editor's request for a story of a family member who had a profound influence on their early lives.

[2] Students are not required to read their stories aloud or complete any assignment they find too traumatic and/or for which they prefer to complete an alternative. However, in six classes taught over four years (approximately 240 students), no student requested an alternative assignment to the one involving writing and reading aloud a family story.

[3] Minor editing of the responses was done to guarantee anonymity and to ensure ease of reading.

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